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NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2021

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AT THE WORLD'S TABLE



## On the Table



From left: Empress by Boon chef Ho Chee Boon and Lion's Den.

# Spice Up the Night

San Francisco's Chinatown glows anew.

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHEL WEILL

ON STOCKTON STREET, TWO ASIAN WOMEN elbow for space and haggle over leafy vegetables and dried seafood plucked from wooden crates and glass jars. The energetic banter, like the lettering on the food bins and signs, is in Chinese. A few blocks away, residents gather to chitchat on benches, play chess and mah-jongg, and practice tai chi in Portsmouth Square, a historic plaza. Last year, these same stretches of San Francisco's Chinatown were practically deserted. Small businesses in the 20-block neighborhood suffered during the pandemic while everyone stayed indoors.

Now, North America's oldest Chinatown (established in the 1850s) is slowly reemerging and remains one of the city's best neighborhoods to wander, thanks to 40-plus alleyways and relatively flat streets lined with galleries, shops, and public art. The no-frills dim sum joints have returned, as have the traditional bakeries, whose out-the-door lines never seem to wane. Some newcomers have also joined the scene, bringing a new sense of hope to the district. Among them, Lion's Den Bar & Lounge – Chinatown's first new live-music lounge in more than 40 years – as well as the long-awaited Empress by Boon, which welcomed diners over the summer alongside the swaying red lanterns of Grant Avenue, Chinatown's main thoroughfare.

Helmed by chef Ho Chee Boon, the former executive chef of Hakkasan International who earned Michelin stars in London and New York, the glammed-up

Cantonese restaurant took over the historic sixth-floor location once occupied by the Empress of China, a cherished special-occasion restaurant since 1966 that closed in 2014. The focal point of Empress by Boon's entrance is the original 24-foot-diameter carved wooden pergola, transported from Taiwan, which now houses a chic lounge bar. While there aren't many other remnants of the old Empress left, Boon hopes her essence still shines.

The Empress originally served as one of five thriving banquet halls in the tight-knit community and is the latest to be taken over by a marquee chef. In 2016, Brandon Jew opened his now Michelin-starred Mister Jiu's in the former Four Seas space (as a child, Jew attended his uncle's wedding there). A year later, the former Gold Mountain hall reopened as China Live, a 30,000-square-foot Chinese-food emporium created by longtime San Francisco chef and restaurateur George Chen. The casual first-floor marketplace serves fresh noodles, seasonal vegetable dishes, and dim sum, including the popular pan-fried pork buns. Upstairs, elegant Eight Tables has racked up accolades for its sublime ten-course tasting menu and exclusivity – diners access the eight-table reservations-only restaurant through a back-alley entrance with a private elevator.

Chen often shops neighborhood streets for produce with the “Chinese grandmas,” as he calls them, and likes to grab egg tarts for his staff from Golden Gate Bakery, which has mercurial opening hours, but, as Chen puts it, “Word gets around, and we line up because the tarts are fresh, and warm custard is really the only way to enjoy them.”

As for the new arrivals, Chen says the more the merrier, but he hopes anyone coming to the area sees that Chinatown is more than just a tourist stop. “There are still so many ma-and-pa shops and families that have been here a long time – some for more than a hundred years. It's a real community that we need to work hard to support,” he says.

Here are eight spots that put the sizzle in Chinatown.

**Golden Gate Bakery** is known for their traditional baked goods, such as egg-custard tarts in a buttery crust and pineapple mooncakes,



From top: China Live deliciousness and Eight Tables' “Silk Degrees” cocktail.





## On the Table

packaged in pink boxes – as well as long lines that wind down the block. Tourists, take note: Their hours *are* unpredictable, and they're a bit like *Seinfeld's* Soup Nazi – they'll yell at you if you take photos. (**Eastern Bakery**, Chinatown's oldest, is a reliable backup for great egg-custard tarts and coffee crunch cake, an only-in-San Francisco classic.)

In its “new” location since 2015, **Sam Wo Restaurant** dishes out the famous jook rice porridge and barbecue-pork rice noodle rolls that have made it a community favorite for more than a century.

**Lucky Creation Vegetarian Restaurant** is a rare meatless standout in Chinatown, established by a Buddhist couple from Hong Kong and still family run. Cash only.

The first solo restaurant of internationally renowned chef Ho Chee Boon, **Empress by Boon** has special-occasion-worthy views of San Francisco from three sophisticated dining areas, where the crisp, colorful aesthetic matches the modern Cantonese dishes such as *xiao long bao* (soup dumplings) with Ibérico ham and grilled black cod in a soya and *shacha* sauce. Tables book out in advance, but the bar and lounge now serve delicious dim sum, no reservation needed.

Two-story **China Live** stands as an ode to modern Chinese cuisine, with a casual food hall, a cocktail lounge upstairs, Eight Tables – home to one of the city's top tasting menus – and a culinary shop stocking tea and tableware from the motherland.

Chinatown's only Michelin-starred restaurant, **Mister Jiu's**, serves Chinese family-style entrees – Peking-style roast duck with house-made pancakes, peanut butter hoisin sauce, and scallions is a crowd pleaser – on tables with built-in lazy Susans beneath gold lotus chandeliers.

**Lion's Den Bar & Lounge** amps up the neighborhood's nightlife with DJs and live bands, plus craft cocktails and small bar bites such as fried oysters, salt-and-pepper wings, and crispy shrimp rolls.



From left: Vegetarian dishes at Lucky Creation and the historic Four Seas space, now home to Mister Jiu's.

## SAVOR SAN FRANCISCO

How to get the lay of the land, and where to stay to pop into Chinatown.

**GO Context Travel's** private three-hour historian-led tour through North Beach and Chinatown includes a stop in historic Portsmouth Square, a gathering spot for the Chinese community, and the place where the discovery of gold was first announced in 1848. *Departures: Any day through 2022; from \$476 for four.*

**STAY** Inside a 1909 Nob

Hill building, **The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco** has 336 modern guest rooms and suites, as well as a lobby lounge pouring exclusive tastings from Napa Valley winemaker Jean-Charles Boisset. *Doubles from \$489, including a \$64 breakfast credit daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

Cable cars clang right past the stately 606-room

**Fairmont San Francisco** atop Nob Hill, which is ideally situated for Chinatown outings and a ten-minute (downhill) walk to Empress by Boon. It's also home to the legendary Tonga Room, with its thatched huts, faux thunderstorms on the central lagoon, and potent tiki drinks. *Doubles from \$379, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.* **VI.**